

Sebastiano Ricci

Annalisa Scarpa

The Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs



TRINITY FINE ART

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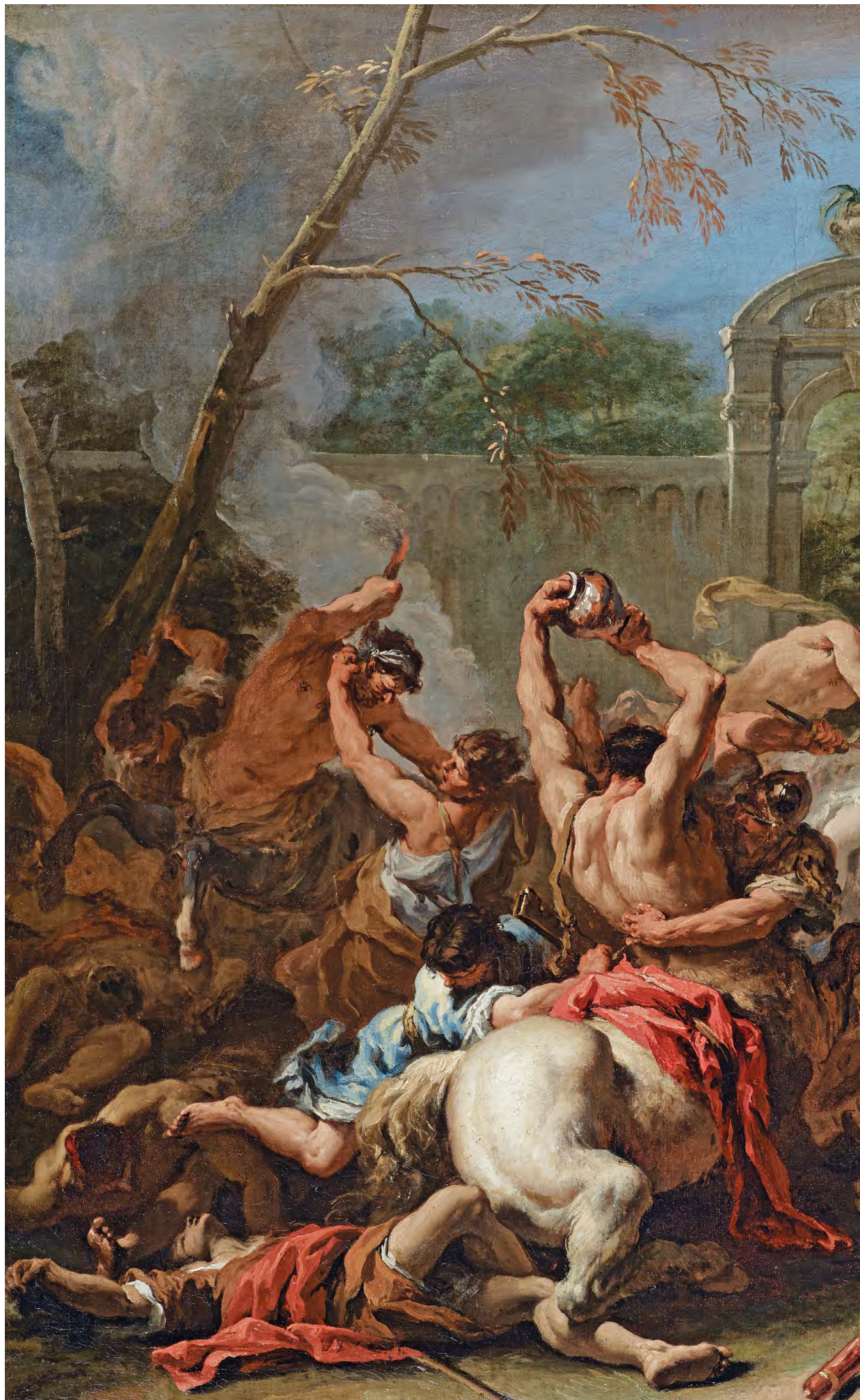
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The Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs

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SEBASTIANO RICCI

(Belluno 1659 – Venice 1734)

The Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs

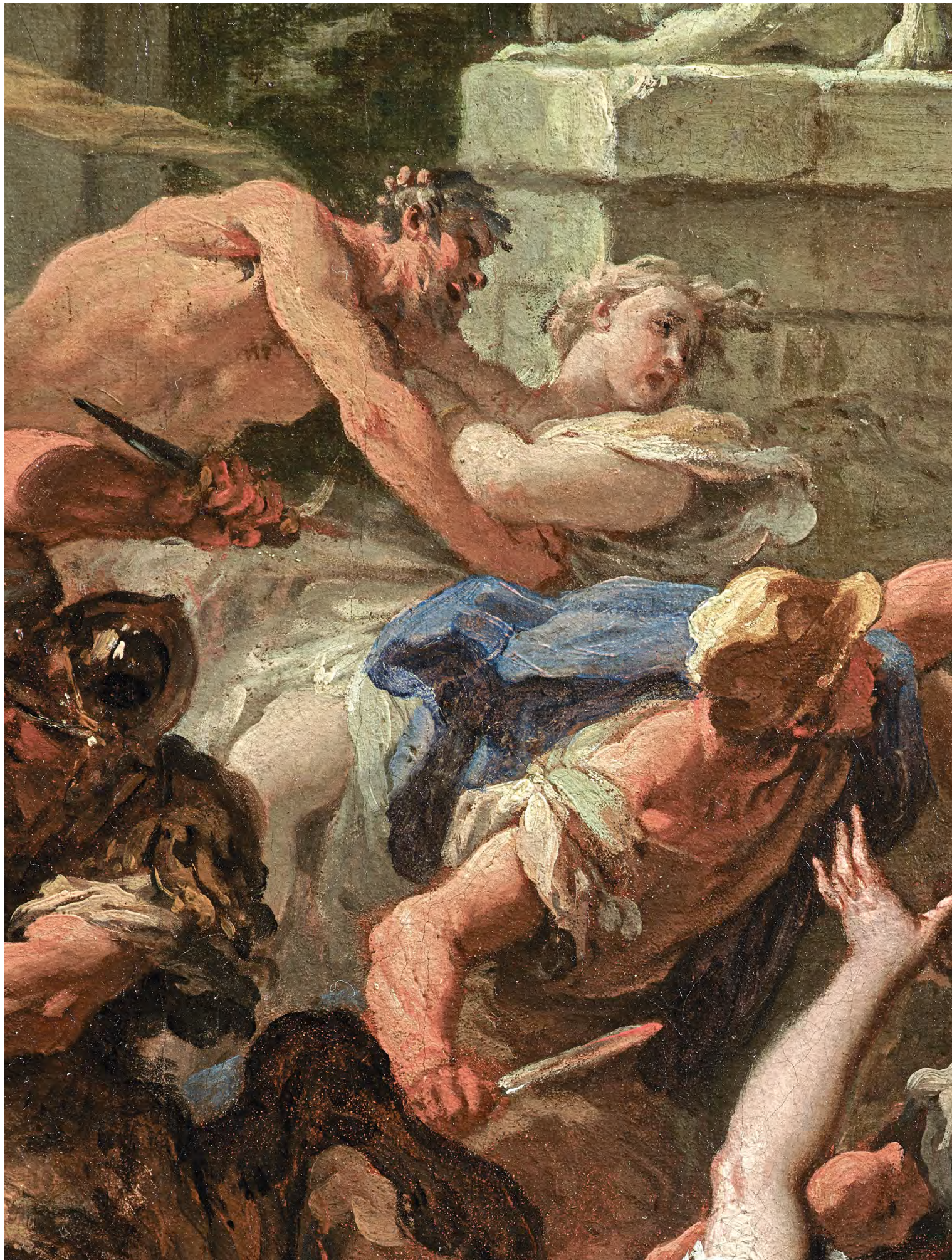
Oil on canvas, 62,5 x 76 cm, (24⁵/₈ x 29⁷/₈ in)

¹ *Odyssey*, 21, 295 et seq.

² *Metamorphoses*, 12, 210 et seq.

Recounted by Homer¹ and Ovid² before being taken up again by Plutarch, Apollonius of Rhodes and others, the *Centauiromachia*, or *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*, tells of the violent brawl that broke out at the wedding feast of Pirithous, King of the Lapiths, a peaceful tribe of Thessaly, and Hippodamia, the daughter of the King of Argos. The Centaurs, hybrid creatures with a human torso on a horse's body, were related to the couple and so they were invited to the feast where, being unaccustomed to strong liquor, they all rapidly succumbed to an excess of drink and began to molest the bride and the other women present. The Lapiths responded with a certain vehemence and a brutal struggle broke out, involving all of the guests and ending with the Centaurs being driven away, thanks also to the intervention of the legendary Attic hero Theseus, a friend of the groom and a guest at the wedding. In iconographical terms, the episode has been seen since Classical times as symbolising the victory of civilisation over barbarity and over man's basest animal instincts. The *Centauiromachia* is frequently found on friezes adorning





Greek temples, for example on the Temple of Zeus at Olympia or the celebrated metopes from the Parthenon. The theme, which was also addressed by Michelangelo in a marble work in high relief now in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence, was much loved, in particular, by the painters of the Baroque era because the dynamism and vehemence that the tale itself suggests perfectly reflected the love of energy and vigour so typical of that culture, as indeed did the theme of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* and all the other similar themes associated with it.



The mind and brush of Sebastiano Ricci spawned a sophisticated masterpiece on this theme which may not be large in terms of its size but which is grandiose in its compositional complexity, a masterpiece of such force that it spills over the edges of the canvas, extending its narrative into a vaster and more composite space. Ricci adores “mass scenes” and, like a sophisticated modern film director, he narrates them

Fig. 1: Sebastiano Ricci, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 310 x 503 cm
Venice, Palazzo Barbaro-Curtis

³ L. MORETTI, *Documenti e appunti su Sebastiano Ricci (con qualche cenno su altri pittori del Settecento)*, in *Saggi e Memorie di Storia dell'Arte*, Florence 1978, p. 99; B. AIKEMA, *Le decorazioni di Palazzo Barbaro Curtis a Venezia fino alla metà del Settecento*, in "Arte Veneta", XLI, 1987, 1987, pp.147-148.

by focusing intensely on every element, fully grasping the importance of seemingly minor details. That talent is clearly displayed with force and elegance in this picture. To see Ricci first getting to grips with one of these film-like scenes, we need to go back to the turn of the 17th century, when he accepted a commission from the nobleman Alvise Barbaro (1636–98) to paint the huge canvas (310 x 503 cm.) depicting the *Rape of the Sabine Women* that was to dominate the ballroom of Palazzo Barbaro in Venice³. The picture, still imbued with thoroughly



Fig. 2: Sebastiano Ricci, *Queen Theodolinda Founding the Basilica*, 190 x 280 cm, Monza, Cathedral

⁴ SCARPA 2006, see literature, n. 568.

Baroque elements, harks back quite clearly to the central Italian style of such artists as Annibale Carracci, Pietro da Cortona and Luca Giordano, a style to which Ricci continued to subscribe unhesitatingly from the 1680s right through to the mid-1690s⁴.

Painted when Ricci returned from Milan (1696), where he had been involved in frescoing the church of San Bernardino alle Ossa, the picture does full justice to the tremendous power of his art, even though it still reveals a somewhat archaic quality in its style and a certain roughness

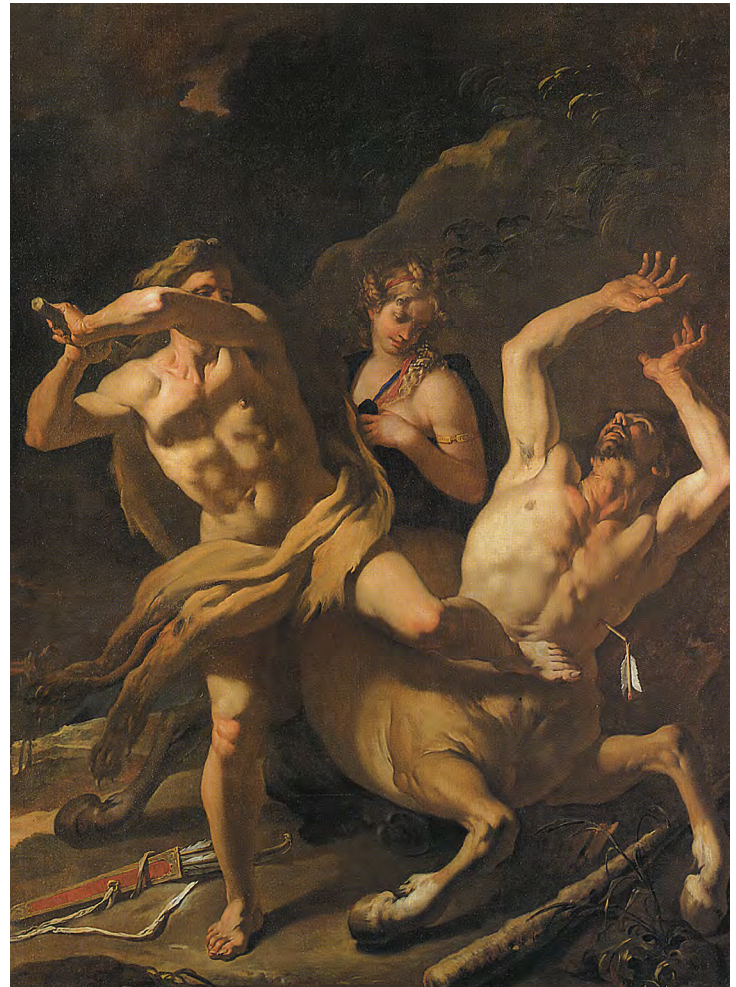




in his handling of the anatomy of his figures which display an affinity with certain details in *Queen Theodolinda Founding the Basilica* in Monza Cathedral⁵, but these flaws, if we may call them that, were to be dispelled over time.

Where the posture of his figures' bodies and their dynamic torsions are concerned, we can detect a subsequent evolution in his two versions of

⁵ SCARPA 2006, see literature, n. 302.



the myth of *Hercules and Nessus*, a large one from the Pagani collection now in a private collection and a small but extremely sophisticated one now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston⁶, both of which may be dated to the turn of the 17th century and both of which owe a debt to Guido Reni, the “divine Guido” whom he had known in his time in

Figs. 3,4: Luca Giordano, *Vulcan's Forge*, Houston, St. Petersburg, Hermitage; Sebastiano Ricci, *Hercules and Nessus*, 264 x 194 cm, formerly Marquess Cesare Pagani, Milan, present whereabouts unknown

⁶ SCARPA 2006, n. 170.

Emilia: a master of classicism whose teaching played a crucial part in the development of Ricci's art.

The subject, to which Ricci was to return on the walls of Palazzo Marucelli in Florence a few years later, already hints at the gradual development of a personal style: the vigorous display of the bodies of the figures is matched in a more harmonious fashion by a more mature awareness of anatomical detail, and we can already detect the approach to colour that was to prompt him to subscribe with passion to the teaching



Fig. 5: Sebastiano Ricci, *Hercules and Nessus*, 75 x 125.7 cm, Houston, Museum of Fine Arts

of Paolo Veronese and to mark a crucial turning point in his art.

Equally undeniable in this vigorous, vehement bodily prowess, in this marked muscularity, is the even more recent teaching of Luca Giordano. One has but to think of Giordano's painting of *Vulcan's Forge* now in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, or of his *Hercules and Nessus* now in the The National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest, to perceive Ricci's obvious interest in the artist's work.

The *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs* under discussion in this paper slots in perfectly between these two poles. Mentioned by Morandotti⁷ with a date of c. 1715, it was subsequently pushed back to the turn of the 17th century by Martini⁸. The measured cleaning to which the painting has recently been subjected has restored the full force of the artist's

⁷ MORANDOTTI 1941, see literature, p.7.

⁸ MARTINI 1964, see literature, p.151, note 33.



palette, the richness of his *impasto* and the skilled use of *chiaroscuro* that he already shows he has mastered to a considerable degree.

Another extremely interesting parallel may be drawn from a comparison with the *Rape of the Sabine Women* in the Liechtenstein Museum in Vienna, in which Ricci expresses the full force and vehemence of his early

Fig. 6: Sebastiano Ricci, *Hercules and Nessus* (detail), fresco, Florence, Palazzo Marucelli Fenzi

maturity: the skilled movement of the figures, their dynamic gestures and the brilliant symmetrical arrangement of the groups are precisely reflected in our painting, while the serene and clear naturalistic and architectural background, the work of a “young” Marco Ricci, embraces and encloses the narrative in a thoroughly theatrical fashion.

In addition to this, there is the clear intervention of his nephew Marco in the scenographical background, easily perceptible in the landscape (the tree on the left with its slender trunk and scanty foliage) and in the

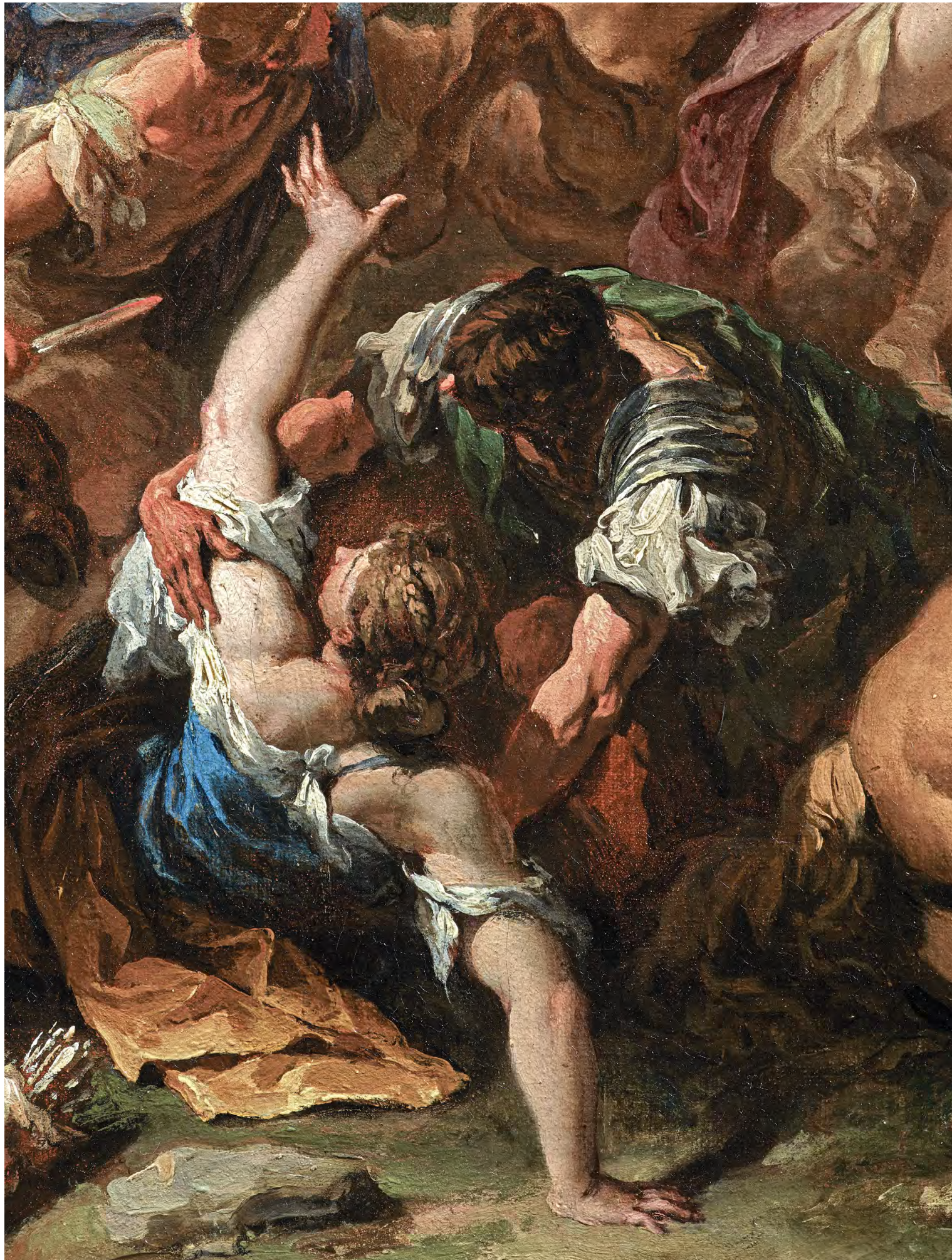


Fig. 7: Sebastiano Ricci, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 197 x 303 cm Vienna, Liechtenstein Museum

architectural construction with a triumphal arch closing the space and acting as the linchpin on which the tale appears to hinge, accentuating its narrative dynamic.

These considerations prompt us to subscribe to a later date than the date previously mooted⁹, thus placing the picture within the first five years of the 18th century. Indeed the uncle’s partnership with his

⁹ SCARPA 2006, see literature, n. 277.





nephew is abundantly recorded from the start of the 18th century, when Marco returned to Venice after a spell of absence from the city and was taken under his uncle Sebastiano's wing. We should not overlook the fact that, in various letters addressed to Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici in 1704, Ricci himself sings the praises of Marco's landscapes (even enclosing an sample) in a tone that



suggests that the Prince was already very familiar with the painter. The foliage of the slender tree on the left of our painting mirror those in the Palazzo Marucelli *Hercules and Nessus* and also adorn a number of other scenes in the Sala di Ercole, a respectful sign that the partnership between the two men was already in existence.

Our painting comes from the prestigious Rasini di Castelfampo

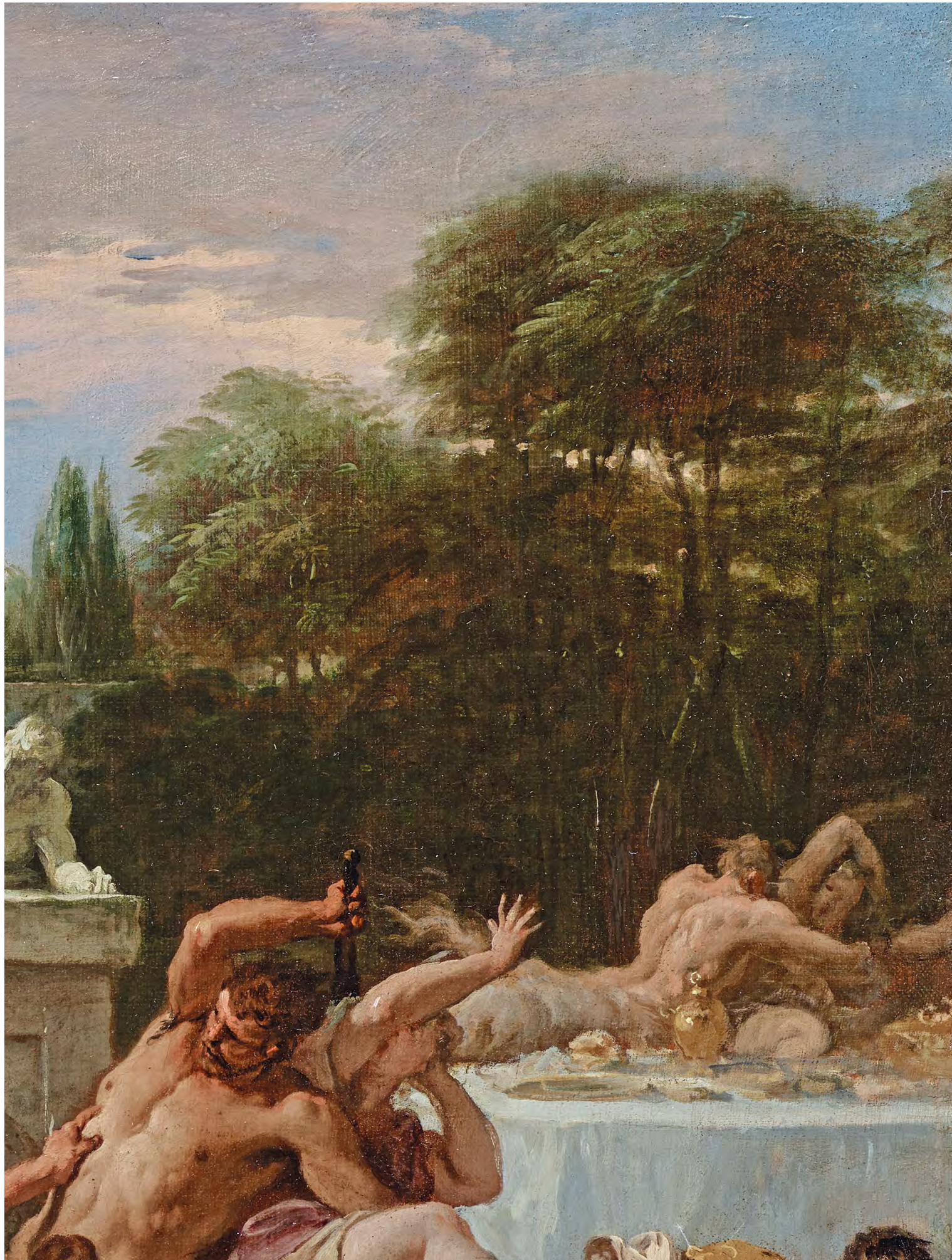
Fig. 8: Sebastiano Ricci, *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*, 138.4 x 176.8 cm, Atlanta, High Museum of Art

collection in which it has been cherished for almost a century, its excellent condition testifying to that loving care. Its intrinsic beauty is compounded by even greater “added value” in that it is a work which has never been put on the market since its acquisition many decades ago, so its current appearance, particularly after cleaning, allows us the more accurately to analyse Ricci’s work in the early years of the 18th century, the years that witnessed the flowering of his stylistic independence and of his highly personal approach to painting. It is thanks to him that Venetian painting crossed the ford of 17th century late Mannerist



Fig. 9: Sebastiano Ricci, *Centaurs*, pencil and wash on paper, Northumberland, private collection (possibly a first compositional draft for the figures of the Centaurs, see Stock 1980, under literature)

Baroque to enter the new world that placed Venice back in the heart of contemporary artistic creativity. The painting’s cleaning has revealed the richness of his matter, the full, sumptuous thickness of his whites and the moiré effect of his palette lit up by sudden flashes of light, of which Ricci was to become a past master from this moment on, setting the tone for future generations of artists. The muscular torsions dynamically sculpting the figures’ bodies highlight the frenzied excitement of the fray in which everyone is fighting and wrestling with everyone else, their weapons not only daggers but also vases and other crockery, their feet, fists and nails tearing flesh, while the scene is set against a grandiose backdrop in intensely varying shades of green and brown. Almost a perfect, splendidly modern cinema trailer.



Sebastiano Ricci
(Belluno 1659 – Venice 1734)



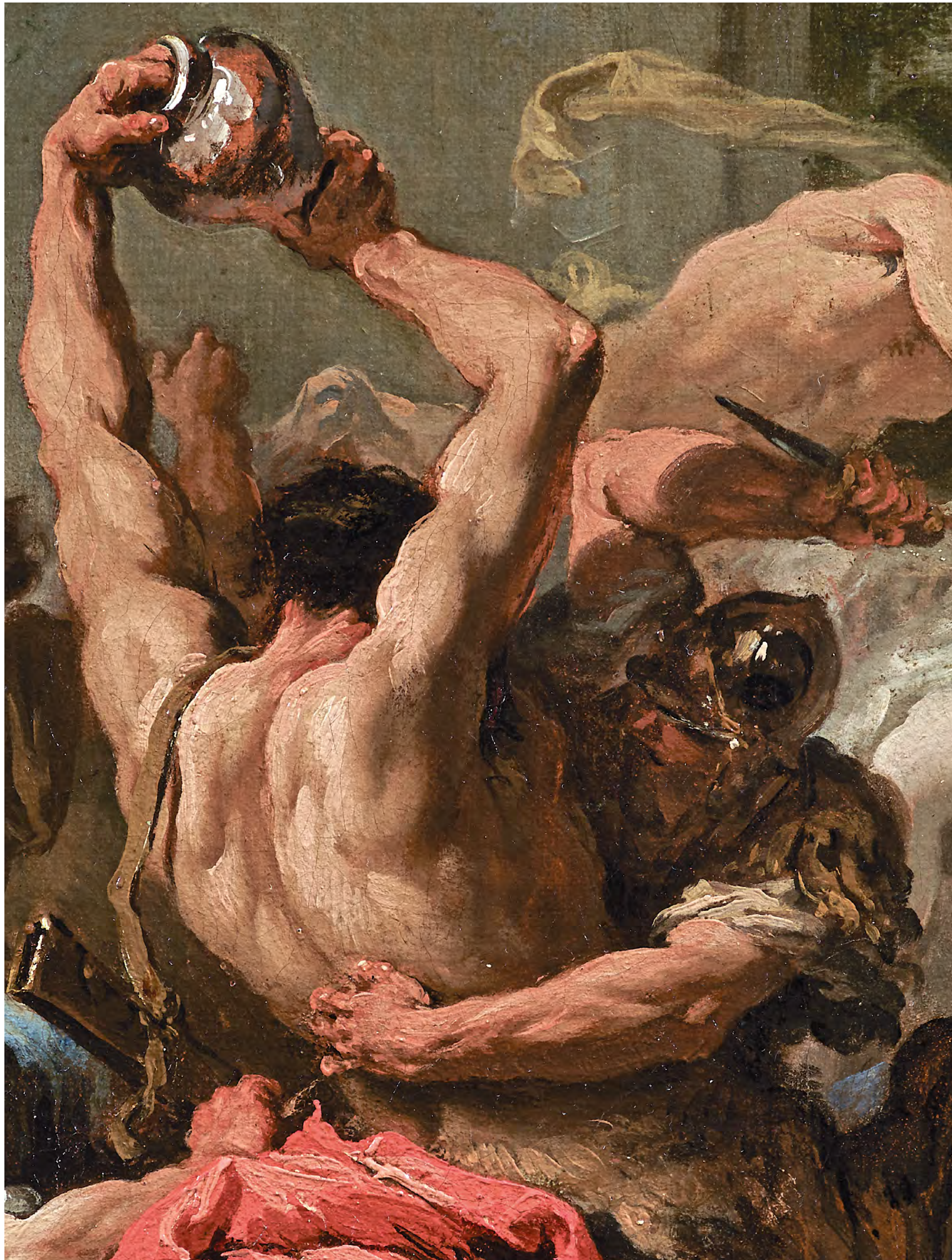
Fig. 10: Sebastiano Ricci, *Self Portrait*, 98.5 x 72.2 cm, Florence, Uffizi

¹⁰ G.C. SAGRESTANI, *Le vite di artisti dei secoli XVII e XVIII: Vita di Sebastiano Ricci* (1716) manuscript, [edition consulted ed. A. MATTEOLI, Rome 1972].

Sebastiano Ricci was born in Belluno on 1 August 1659. He was sent to Venice at the age of 12 or 14 to perfect his aptitude for art. The sources disagree where his early masters are concerned, some, like Sagrestani¹⁰ (1716) and Pascoli¹¹ (1736), telling us that he apprenticed to Federico Cervelli while others, such as Temanza¹² (1738), identify Sebastiano Mazzoni as his “*first unheeded master*”. In any event, it is interesting to note that neither was a local artist, since Cervelli hailed from Lombardy and Mazzoni from Florence. This, of course, may have stimulated the young apprentice’s interest in other not strictly Venetian

styles; be that as it may, Ricci already appears to have had the ability to stake out his own ground, if not to compete on the Venetian artistic scene proper, by 1680, and we find him in Bologna two years later preparing to sign a contract for an altarpiece depicting *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* for the Confraternita di San Giovanni de’ Fiorentini (the painting has since been lost, but we know of it from engravings by Domenico Maria Bonavera and Giuseppe Maria Moretti). The sources





suggest that Ricci's move to Bologna was occasioned by serious personal problems, in particular by an attempt to poison a young woman with whom he was alleged to have fathered a child. The documents paint a picture of Sebastiano as something of an unscrupulous rake, a "*huomo capriccioso*" but who enjoyed the solid protection of such powerful Venetian families as the Tron and the Pisani. Despite this stern view, however, it seems that once he had built a sufficiently strong financial position for himself in Bologna, he had the woman join him, with their daughter, and the couple were joined in holy matrimony.

A sophisticated easel painter, fresco artist and draughtsman, Ricci worked in numerous Italian cities including Piacenza, Parma, Florence, Rome and Milan, showing himself to be open to a rich variety of figurative experiences. In Bologna he met Carlo Cignani and Bibiena, with whom he painted the Oratorio della Madonna del Serraglio (in Parma) between 1685 and 1687; in Roma he was a guest at the Palazzo Farnese where he acquired greater in-depth knowledge of the work of Annibale Carracci and of Pietro da Cortona, from whom he was to learn important lessons that bore fruit on the ceilings of Palazzo Colonna. Thanks to the versatile aspect of his art and to the painterly experiences that he absorbed during his travels in many Italian cities, Ricci brought to Venice a number of innovative artistic visions that were to alter the style of future Venetian painting completely.

Ricci was equally at home with religious, historical and mythological subjects, his concrete vision allowing him to imbue his figures with convincing realism whatever their nature. He was the director who turned the same actress from hieratic Madonna into sublime heroine, the same actor from devout saint into brave and pugnacious demigod. He was in Florence from 1706 to 1707, painting four ceilings in

¹¹ L. PASCOLI *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni: Vita di Bastiano Ricci*, vol.II, Rome 1736.

¹² T. TEMANZA, *Zibaldone di memorie storiche...*, Venice 1738 [edition consulted ed. N. IVANOFF, Venice 1963].

Palazzo Marucelli with the *Victory of Peace over War*, of *Vice over Virtue*, of *Chastity over Passion* and of *Wisdom over Ignorance*, while on the fifth ceiling he turned to the *Labours of Hercules* to illustrate moral and civic virtues. During his time in Florence he also painted *Venus Taking Her Leave of Adonis* on a base by quadrature painter Giuseppe Tonelli in the Pitti Palace. In the works painted during his time in Tuscany, Ricci reveals a perfect awareness of colour, and of light and shade which he divides evenly and harmoniously in his pictures.

By 1708 he was back in Venice, working on a *Madonna and Child with Saints* for the church of San Giorgio Maggiore, in which he echoes the work of Carracci, of Correggio and of Veronese's Cinquecentesque style. Ricci's knowledge of, and admiration for, Veronese's work was of crucial importance in his artistic development, just as it was to be for Tiepolo later on. But Ricci combined Veronese's clear, luminous palette and open compositions with the rapid brushwork, the lively use of colour and graceful figures of Pietro da Cortona and Luca Giordano, thereby laying the groundwork for Venetian painting of the 18th century. He also worked outside Italy, in the Castle of Schönbrunn on the outskirts of Vienna, whither he was summoned by the Empress to decorate the ceilings of the palace, while in 1712 he was in London, where he was joined by his nephew Marco. In London he met Lord Burlington, for whom he painted eight large canvases on mythological subjects, including the *Meeting of Bacchus and Ariadne*, *Diana and the Nymphs* and the *Triumph of Galatea*, all of them still hanging in Burlington House, now the Royal Academy of Art, and in the National Gallery. On his return journey to Italy, Ricci stopped off in Paris where he was admitted to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. His reputation on his return home was such that he could afford to buy



an apartment in the Procuratie Vecchie on St. Mark's Square in Venice with the money that he had earned. He was summoned thereafter to various parts of Italy and the continent to paint on commission, and he frequently worked in partnership with his nephew, painting numerous pictures for the House of Savoy (*The Repudiation of Hagar*, *King Solomon's Idolatry* and others) and for the Gabrielli family. He also worked for John Smith, the English Consul in Venice, for whom he



Fig. 11: Romualdo Locatelli, *Portrait of Giovanni Rasini*, oil on canvas, Rasini collection, Castel Campo. Our painting by Ricci is visible in the background. We are grateful to Roberto Pancheri for bringing this photo to our attention.

produced a *New Testament*. In the late 1720s he painted *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* now in the church of San Girolamo degli Scalzi in Vicenza. His last works included altarpieces for the churches of the Gesuati and San Rocco in Venice and for the Karlskirche in Vienna. He died in Venice on 15 May 1734.

Provenance

Giovanni Treccani degli Alfieri (1877-1961);
Giovanni Rasini (1892-1952), I conte di Castel Campo;
Elena Rasini di Castel Campo (second wife of Giovanni Rasini), thence by descent.

Exhibited

Rome, *Mostra di Pittura Veneziana del Settecento*, 1941, n. 2;
Lausanne, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, *Trésors de l'Art Vénitien*, 1947, cat. n. 73;
Milan, Villa Reale, *Mostra del Settecento Veneziano*, 1955, cat. n. 60.

Literature

A. MORANDOTTI, *Mostra di Pittura Veneziana del Settecento*, exhibition catalogue, Rome 1941, p. 7 cat. n. 2, reproduced;
R. PALLUCCHINI (ed.), *Trésors de l'Art Vénitien*, exhibition catalogue, Milan and Bruxelles [1947], cat. n. 73;
Settecento Veneziano, exhibition catalogue, Milan 1955, cat. n. 60;
R. PALLUCCHINI, *Il Settecento Veneziano a Milano*, in "Arte Veneta", IX, 1955, p. 264;
C. DONZELLI, G.M. PILO, *I Pittori del Seicento Veneto*, Florence 1967, p. 351;
E. MARTINI, *La pittura veneziana del Settecento*, Venice 1964, p. 151, under note 33, reproduced plate 25;
J. DANIELS, *Sebastiano Ricci*, Hove 1976, p. 74, cat. n. 235, reproduced fig. 3;
J. DANIELS, *L'opera completa di Sebastiano Ricci*, Milan 1976, p. 118, cat. n. 334, reproduced plate XLII;
P. BIGONGIARI, *Livio Mehus dalla macchia al tocco e la coeva scultura tardobarocca fiorentina*, in "Paradigma", Vol. 2, 1978, p. 156;
J. STOCK (ed.), *Disegni veneti di collezioni inglesi*, Vicenza 1980, p. 53.
P. BIGONGIARI, *Livio Mehus dalla macchia al tocco e la coeva scultura tardobarocca fiorentina*, in *Il Seicento Fiorentino*, Florence 1982, p. 146;
A. SCARPA, *Sebastiano Ricci*, Milan 2006, cat. n. 277, pp. 240-241, reproduced fig. 166, p. 439, reproduced also on the cover of the book;
A. SCARPA, in *Da Canaletto a Tiepolo*, exhibition catalogue, Milan 2008, p. 267;
F. RIGON 2012, *Sapienza iconografica di Sebastiano Ricci*, in *Sebastiano Ricci 1659-1734*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, 14-15 December 2009, ed. G. PAVANELLO, Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Verona 2012, pp. 145-146, fig. 23;
B. BRISON, *La collezione di dipinti di Giovanni Treccani degli Alfieri (1912-1961)*, dissertation, University of Milan, 2014, pp. 138-139;
R. PANCHERI, *Thea Casalbore Rasini (1893-1939), una scultrice milanese tra verismo e simbolismo*, in Atti della Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati, Trento 2017, p. 246, under note 30.



Fig. 12: Photograph taken in 1930, whilst the painting was in the collection of Giovanni Treccani degli Alfieri: photo Mario Castagneri, Raccolte Grafiche e Fotografiche del Castello Sforzesco. Civico Archivio Fotografico, Milan

The painting was restored by
Saviano Bellè in London in 2020

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